

Statement of Congressman Frank Wolf
House Committee on Natural Resources
Hearing on Indian Tribes of Virginia Federal Recognition
Wednesday, April 18, 2007

Good morning. Mr. Chairman, thank you for allowing me to testify today.

The Virginia Indian tribes were the first to greet the settlers at Jamestown when they arrived 400 years ago. Without the Indians' friendship, the Jamestown settlement very likely would not have survived.

We owe the Virginia tribes a huge debt of gratitude. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that without them, our great nation may not have been born. However, I remain concerned that Mr. Moran's legislation to provide sovereign status for six Virginia Indian tribes could lay the foundation for casino gambling in the Commonwealth and threaten Virginia's long history of clean government, economic growth and low crime.

Specifically, the legislation does not shut the door on the opportunity for these tribes to acquire land and eventually establish tribal casinos. I know that the current tribal leadership has indicated that they do not want to pursue gambling – and I believe them – but I worry that future leadership of the tribes may not share their views and will pursue establishing tribal casinos.

There is no guarantee that future generations of Virginia's tribes would hold the same view as the current leaders. Case in point: an Indian tribe in the Michigan area reassured Congress that it did not intend to pursue gambling when it was granted federal recognition in the early-1990's, yet only months later the tribe voted unanimously to pursue gambling. More recently, an Indian tribe in California whose chairman in 2000 said they weren't interested in gambling, changed his mind in 2003 and moved to develop off-reservation casino sites. I am submitting with my statement newspaper articles about both tribes.

Why won't the tribes accept a law that would prevent gambling on tribal lands? If the tribes are not interested in gambling, why not make that the law? I want to support legislation to recognize the Virginia tribes and have worked with the tribes to find language that would accomplish their aim of recognition without opening the door to casino gambling in Virginia. Unfortunately, my efforts have been rebuffed.

If casino gambling comes to our state we will be opening the door to the myriad of financial and social ills associated with gambling. Virginia's tourism sector, its economy and its communities are some of the strongest in the country. Places such as Williamsburg, Yorktown and Jamestown are national treasures which draw visitors from all over the world. Small businesses thrive in Virginia. The Commonwealth should not risk tarnishing its reputation by allowing casino-style gambling within its borders. There are examples of places across the country which have been overwhelmed with problems attendant to gambling since the arrival of Indian casinos.

Virginia does not have casino gambling, and because we do not, we have avoided the crime, corruption and scandal that a number of other states have fallen victim to. A few years ago I asked the Library of Congress to provide me with a list of all the government officials across the country who had been implicated in gambling-related corruption cases or had been forced to resign due to gambling-related activities during the year.

I was sickened by what I saw. The package was about two inches thick. It was page after page after page of media reports of officials being caught in gambling-related schemes. I am submitting with my statement the list of officials.

As the author of legislation which created the National Gambling Impact Study Commission that released its two-year study in 1999, I know firsthand about the devastating social and financial costs of gambling. Crime. Prostitution. Corruption. Suicide. Destroyed families. Child and spouse abuse. Bankruptcy.

My concern is not with the federal recognition of Virginia's Indian tribes. My concern is with the explosive spread of gambling and the potential for casino gambling to come to Virginia. No bill should become law unless it protects the interests of the Commonwealth. I stand ready to work with my Virginia colleagues and the tribes seeking recognition to make sure the proud state that is home to presidents and many other well known Americans is not vulnerable to the political and social corruption that gambling leaves in its wake.